

HALF-FULL OR HALF-EMPTY?

HOW INSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION COULD TURN A WAVE OF FACULTY RETIREMENTS INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

LORNA M. PETERSON

Difficult days lie ahead for colleges and universities, and some real challenges as well. One challenge is that an entire generation of scholars will be retiring in critical numbers over the next several years. A national survey conducted three years ago by the University of California at Los Angeles revealed that nearly one-third of the nation's full-time professors were age 55 or older, up significantly from the end of the 1980s. Now, complicating the likely wave of faculty retirements, many higher education institutions nationwide will be experiencing budget cuts as deep as 5 percent.

To those who see the glass as half-empty, departments will be losing faculty at a time when their budgets are ill-prepared to recruit and hire replacements, let alone expand into new areas of knowledge. But to those who see the glass half-full, these retirements present an opportunity to bring about substantive change without sacrificing what's of value.

Downward spirals, after all, do give way to periods of expansion. In the early 1990s, for example, colleges and universities nationwide experienced a downturn similar to today's. New England public land-grant universities suffered devastating cuts, while private colleges ran unanticipated and uncustomary deficits. Yet, in an editorial that year, I ventured that "There are areas of growth we will be able to undertake, but only if we do so together."

In fact, Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke and Smith colleges and the University of Massachusetts Amherst have been working together as members of the Five Colleges consortium since 1965. We've learned that cooperation affords possibilities for riding out the vicissitudes of the economy and addressing change in the academy. It comes down to a simple truth: colleges and universities can do more together for less.

Now, we again find ourselves confronting dramatic change with the threat of drastically reduced resources. Rapidly advancing technologies and an emerging global economy call upon us to revitalize the curriculum. Yet, demographic projections warn of faculty retirements on an unprecedented scale—as high as 50 percent in some fields—over the next few years. These pressures coincide with what the *Chronicle of Higher Education* earlier this year described as "another downer of a year for college endowments." The typical college portfolio lost 6 percent in 2001-02. For some institutions, it was the third straight year of losses.

The Five Colleges now are looking at how further collaboration might help them cope with the new faculty demography. Not all positions lost to retirements can be replaced, we know, and certainly not at all the institutions. Nor can we meet all the demands for new courses and new programs on every campus. What we *can* do, working in consort, is to preserve in the aggregate, if not at each institution, the integrity of the curriculum, including the traditional offerings that make our liberal arts curriculum so rich and comprehensive.

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Specifically, we encouraged the faculty to take account of projected losses within their own departments at each campus and to explore ways in which coordination of course offerings and in hiring replacements might maintain what's essential while ensuring a robust and vital curriculum that takes account of new knowledge and new ways of understanding the world. Those conversations helped frame a proposal to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, in which we sought support to address the issue of faculty retirements on two fronts. First, we would create a limited number of joint appointments to encourage cross-campus coordination of the curriculum in departments and fields most likely

to experience large numbers of retirements. Secondly, we would explore ways for our schools to compete for scholars in a national arena likely to become more competitive as large numbers of faculty retire across the country within the span of a few years.

Joint appointments are not a new model for us, or others. The five campuses have had success with joint appointments in a wide range of fields over 30 years. Some years ago, the faculty in Film Studies felt they had too few hands-on production courses. Teaching film and video production, however, is a costly undertaking for any single institution, and none of our schools was prepared to invest in an expanded program of its own. Instead, the Five Colleges Film Council proposed hiring two joint appointees who would teach on a coordinated schedule at all five campuses and acquiring equipment on a shared basis. By that arrangement, we have avoided costly duplication and managed to create a comprehensive program of film and video study without compromising the discrete nature of the campus programs served by it.

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The key to success in joint faculty appointments is a commitment to joint planning. At their best, these shared positions encourage the development of complementary curriculum with greater depth and range than even a large university might afford in the best of times. This is true for interdisciplinary as well as departmental programs.

In a recent appeal to the faculty to think through demographic issues, we asked them to address some difficult questions. If four specialists in a field are about to retire at four different campuses, do all four have to be replaced? Or could one or two of those positions support instead a new specialty in some emerging field? If a new field must be developed, might the areas to be covered, whether geographic or disciplinary, be spread across two or three or even all five institutions?

Among the departments and programs grappling with these issues are some traditional ones such as Russian and East European Studies, where half the faculty across the five campuses are likely to retire over the next two to three years. Their goal in planning together is to protect the core curriculum by thinking in terms of course offerings and of new hires at all five campuses. In contrast, the Five Colleges program in

Asian/Pacific/American Studies offers an example of a new program created by a small group of faculty who forged a core curriculum from existing offerings and inter-campus consultation in making new appointments. Faculty demographics have even motivated some large departments to meet for the first time to talk about staffing and curriculum.

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The \$600,000 grant to Five Colleges from the Mellon Foundation will enable us to build on past experience in developing a shared approach to the loss of faculty due to retirements and to the demand for new areas in the curriculum. In the next several years, we will make six joint appointments, either to replace a retiree or add a new specialization. In order to be granted one of these shared positions, faculty in a particular field will have to present a plan for coordinating their programs for both current offerings and new hires.

A small portion of the grant funds will also enable us in the coming year to explore the feasibility of partnering with other institutions within driving distance of our own to address the special needs of the growing pool of dual-career couples. Approximately 40 percent of male faculty members and 35 percent of female faculty members nationwide are married to other academics, according to the *Chronicle*. To position the Five Colleges and other schools throughout the region to better serve—and thereby more effectively recruit—these couples, we plan to explore the creation of a regional clearinghouse of information about appropriate positions available. This Academic Career Network might also help match spouses and partners with professional openings on the campuses, and sponsor opportunities for professional development for those who seek to make a transition from teaching to academic administration.

Once again, and probably not for the last time, economic and curricular realities will move us to cooperate in new ways, encouraging us, we hope, to see a glass half-full.

Lorna M. Peterson is executive director of Five Colleges Inc., the consortium of Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke and Smith colleges and the University of Massachusetts Amherst.